

## Paper Genius

Paul Makovsky



Courtesy of the Irving Harper Archive

When Irving Harper, director of design at George Nelson & Associates, died last August at 99, he was remembered not only as one of the unsung designers who created some of the most iconic twentieth-century American designs, like the 1949 Atomic Ball Clock, the Herman Miller logo, and the 1956 Marshmallow Sofa, but also for his work as an innovative and original paper artist. Attention to his work came first in 2001 when he graced the cover of *Metropolis* magazine, followed by a book, *Irving Harper: Works in Paper* (Rizzoli, 2013), and most recently, in a 2014 exhibition of 77 of his intricate paper sculptures at the Rye Arts Center Gallery.

“I got into doing things in paper because when I was working and making presentations I would make models, and so I got to be good with paper,” Harper once said in an interview. “I did a lot of it when I was working with George to relieve stress and just relax.” Harper liked paper as a medium because you didn’t need any special equipment to make the sculptures: “All you had to do is sit down and cut paper out and score it and bend it and glue it,” he said. Over the space of almost four decades, he created more than 300 abstract geometric works and sculptures filling almost every surface of his 3-story 19th-century farmhouse and barn in Rye, New York with models of imaginary buildings, surreal animals, Picasso-esque figures, and African-inspired masks made of paper. Occasionally, a piece is done in a different medium: toothpicks, straw, twigs, spaghetti.

Harper was born Irving Hoffzimer on the Lower East Side of New York City on July 14, 1916. Of the three children in the family, both Irving and his sister Phyllis showed distinct artistic talent: they could draw. After high school, he studied liberal arts at Brooklyn College and Pratt Institute, and then at night, took classes in architecture at Cooper Union, where the curriculum was dominated by Beaux-Arts thinking. (His sister Phyllis followed in his footsteps, graduating from Cooper

Union with an architecture degree in 1944 and specializing in corporate office planning and design.) In 1934, no doubt influenced by his father’s work as a bookbinder and manufacturer of baby record books, Irving designed and trademarked a novelty baby scrapbook called *My Infancy*.

Graduating in the middle of the Depression, Harper found that full-time design jobs were scarce. “There weren’t many jobs around, and the jobs that were around were only for short-time operations,” explained Harper. “So I would get a job which would last only a month or two, and then I’d be laid off. Then I’d add that job to my portfolio and get another job. Pretty soon, in a fairly short time, I had a stack of jobs about a foot high, and I was a just a kid”. Gilbert Rohde was impressed by Harper’s portfolio and hired him in June 1938, along with other young designers like Dana Stuart Cole, Ernest Farmer, Henry Glass, and Richard MacGraw, where they worked on projects for the 1939 New York World’s Fair, in Rohde’s office on East Fifty-Seventh Street. As a protégé of Dana Cole who was head of the drafting room, Harper was responsible for the creation of the Plexiglas exhibit, the Anthracite exhibit, the Home Furnishings Focal exhibit and the Rohm and Haas exhibit for the World’s Fair. “Harper, then nineteen, went from doing such mundane tasks as stocking supplies to preparing renderings and production drawings for the fair,” writes Phyllis Ross in her book, *Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design For Modern Living*. Ernest Farmer described the office as a “madhouse,”...“something out of a Marx Brothers’ movie.”

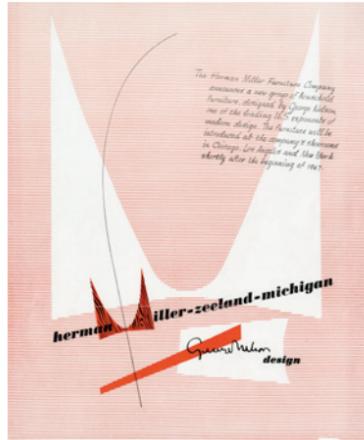
Between January 1939 and July 1940, Harper was hired as a freelance designer by Morris Sanders—a popular architect and industrial designer of the day—to work on the interiors of the Arkansas State Pavilion for the 1939 New York World’s Fair, in addition to designing store fittings for projects such as the Tourneur Beauty Products Shop in New York. In 1940,

he married Belle Seligman, a labor lawyer and at her insistence, changed his surname to Harper.

During World War II, Harper served in both the Army Corps of Engineers as a senior draftsman in Norfolk, Virginia from 1941 to 1943, and the Navy where he eventually became a Lieutenant (Junior, Grade), serving as a communications officer on the USS Woodworth for the duration of the war. At the war’s end, he visited Tokyo where he toured the city, including a visit to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Imperial Hotel. When he returned home, he managed to get a job at Raymond Loewy Associates designing interiors in the department-store division which he described as “a conveyor-belt operation, where you were involved in just one action in a hopeless chain of actions.” Harper explained, “When the office got a job they would turn it over to their planning division, and they would lay out the whole floor. Then once the planning department was through, then—the design department where I worked—did all the four walls and the fixtures. Then from us, it went over to the working drawings, and then to the estimating department, and then by that time we started on another project.”

Bored with his work for Loewy, Harper met for drinks with Ernest Farmer—an old colleague from the Rohde office, and George Nelson, who had assumed Rohde’s position at Herman Miller and was founding his own design firm, George Nelson & Associates, based on getting the Herman Miller and the Howard Miller accounts.

“George and Ernest came to me and suggested I go work for him,” said Harper. “George wanted me to do graphics for the Herman Miller’s new line that was coming out. I did the first ad that appeared in Interiors magazine. Because we had no photographs of furniture to show, I had to do something abstract, so I did this big letter ‘M’ which became Herman Miller’s logo. It was probably



Courtesy of the Herman Miller Archives

the cheapest logo campaign in advertising history.”

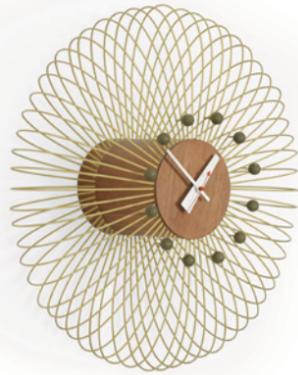
Harper was happy to take a job with George Nelson, and in 1947, he was one of only two designers on staff. Farmer, who is often uncredited for his work for the Nelson office, worked on designing the first furniture collection for Herman Miller, totaling about 80 pieces that included everything from a platform bench and headboards, to vanities, dining tables and desks, down to door and drawer pulls.



Courtesy of the Irving Harper Archive

Aside from designing Herman Miller’s logo, graphics and ads, Harper was put in charge of the Howard Miller clock account (which would become the office’s biggest account). He went on to design dozens and dozens of wall and table clocks in addition to several other works like fireplace accessories, lamps and all graphics, until the late 1950s when a small number of clocks were designed by others on staff like Charles Pollock and Lucia

DeRespinis (who designed about eight clocks, four of which are still in production today). Harper’s initial idea was to create a piece of sculpture. “To omit numbers and have an abstract object that moved on the wall was something no one was doing at the time,” he said. Once or twice a year he would design a group of about eight clocks, which would



then be presented to Howard Miller and put into production. Harper’s *Ball and Asterisk* clocks recalled the moving sculptures of Alexander Calder. Other clocks like the *Spider Web* clock are reminiscent of abstract string sculptures, and the *Harlequin* (Kite) clock is inspired by the restrained black and white pattern of a harlequin costume.

During his 17 years with Nelson, Harper designed innovative graphics, furniture, interiors, and exhibitions, in addition to a whole spectrum of domestic goods—from lamps to typewriters, slide projectors, and record players. His designs for the Proton line of molded melamine dinnerware, for example, differed from other contemporary services in its use of strong color—black and red—based on Japanese lacquerware in addition to the usual white, beige and gray. In 1956, Harper created the *Marshmallow* sofa, a modern design icon that is perhaps his best known design.

Harper described the process of designing furniture for Herman Miller as a very fluid one: “If anybody had an idea for a chair, we would do it, and send the drawings to Herman Miller, and they made a prototype, and if it was okay, we would put it in the line; if it was not okay, then we started all over again, back to the drafting board. But there was no particular marketing conference or anything of that kind: it was all born in the brain of a designer basically. And at the time there was a fairly complete confidence in the designer by the client so that there was practically no opposition to anything. It was an ideal relationship.”

At the Nelson office, Harper performed the function of engineer that handled the machinery and George Nelson was the pilot. “I was happiest being left alone with my work,” said Harper. “The atmosphere was like a school—an atelier studio with everybody running around. Nelson would let you take all the time you wanted.” Harper’s work included awards for graphic design from the Art Directors Club in 1955 and 1956, in addition to his work for an exhibition at the International Biennale in São Paulo which got the office a Gold Medal in 1957.



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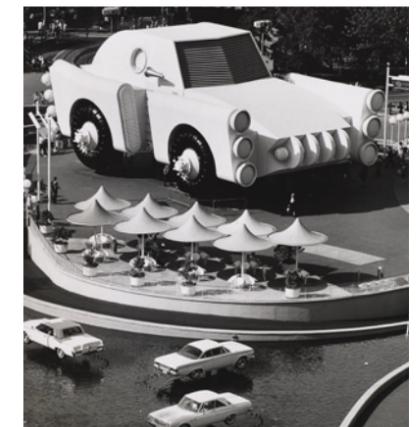
Along with Harper and Ernest Farmer, the Nelson Office had a talented roster of designers like Suzanne Sekey, who worked on the research and layouts for Nelson’s series of design books on *Chairs*, *Display*, *Storage*, and *Living Spaces*; George Mulhauser, designer of the *Coconut chair*; John Pile,

who designed the *Pretzel chair*; Robert Brownjohn, who went on to create film titles such as *Goldfinger*; Ettore Sottsass spent six months on a U.S. student visa, and even Michael Graves did a stint as a young architect in the early 1960s.

“Irv was great to work with,” said Lucia DeRespinis, an industrial designer who worked at the Nelson Office from 1955 to 1963. “I’d have a bunch of ideas and we would go over them and choose the ones for development and I’d do a final mechanical with materials and all and he’d approve it for prototyping. After I had been there for a year or so it was more a collaborative relationship.”

“George relied on Irving a lot,” explained Hilda Longinotti, Nelson’s Aide-de-Camp from 1953 to 1974. “Although there were several directors and vice-presidents over the many years, Irving was given titles but George never made him an official partner of the firm.”

Harper also designed many important exhibitions for the United States Information Agency (USIA); the Theater Arts exhibit, São Paulo (1957); Atoms for Peace exhibit, Cairo (1958); the Transportation Exhibit, Moscow (1961); in addition to the Chrysler pavilion for the 1964 New York World’s Fair, where he designed the idea of a playground using automotive parts, and was involved



Courtesy of the Irving Harper Archive

in creating a lake with islands featuring different elements of automobile manufacturing, including a walk-in engine. “Irving took over the Chrysler exhibition for the N.Y. World’s Fair when George went to Europe for a few weeks and he designed the whole thing,” said DeRespinis. “I worked with him to get the very large presentation model built.” Famed Yale art historian Vincent Scully lauded Harper’s design of the Pavilion, calling it the “surprise of the fair” and “pop art at its best.”

DeRespinis explains that as a director of design Harper never imposed his ideas and knew how to work with everyone. “I’d say he was a very stabilizing influence in the Nelson office,” she said. “He was such a great, creative designer, so knowledgeable and yet so laid back. He could have had a name as big as George Nelson but that wasn’t his goal or his personality.” Longinotti agrees: “Irving headed up the designers in an unassuming way,” she said. “He was always looking over their shoulder and was a quiet critic.”

Looking back, Harper saw his time at the Nelson office as the most important in his design career. “It was the only office I ever knew that allowed designers free reign to do what they wanted, and the bottom line had nothing to do with it. It wasted a lot of money,” Harper said in a 2001 interview. “George was a man of ideas and stimulating to work with. And got clients who liked that kind of design.” Harper had tremendous respect for Nelson who made it all possible: “His biggest contribution was to allow designers to do their own thing. He never pressured you to design anything you didn’t want to do. He was like Diaghilev, able to locate talents who were brilliant in their own way, allowing them to flourish. Though we were never paid a lot, he was never a bottom-line man. He pitched it all away on designs.”

When the office moved to a brownstone on 22nd street, Harper decided it was time to move on, and start his own firm with Phillip George. “Irving asked me to lunch and told me he was going to resign that very day and start his own office,” said Longinotti. “George was very upset and asked what he could do to make him stay. Irving said: ‘Too little, too late’, and left.”

Harper’s sister, Phyllis Hoffzimer, explains that one of the main reasons he was frustrated with George Nelson was because of the issue of authorship: “Irv was extremely disappointed in George Nelson taking credit for all of his designs,” she said. To understand the issue of authorship, you have to remember that during the heyday of American Modern industrial design, designers like Rohde, Dreyfuss, Bel Geddes, and Loewy were treated like celebrities—one-name pop stars placed on a pedestal. “They were individuals responsible for transforming the look of American product. So there always had to be one name associated with the work. We couldn’t just spread it around,” explained Harper in a 2001 interview with the author. “Well, that’s fine. I’m grateful to George for what he did for me. While he was alive I made no demands whatsoever. But now that he’s gone, whenever the Marshmallow Sofa is referred to as a ‘George Nelson design,’ it sort of gets to me. I don’t go out of my way to set things right, but if anybody asks me who designed it, I’m perfectly happy to tell them.”



The industrial designer John Pile, who worked in the office during the 1950s when it was officially known as George Nelson and Co., offers another explanation: “George’s attitude was that it was okay for individual designers to be given credit in trade publications, but for the consumer world, the credit should always be to the firm, not the individual. He didn’t always follow through on that policy though.”

The new firm, Harper+George, went on to do work for Braniff Airlines, Jack Lenor Larsen, and Hallmark Cards, among many others. “I wanted to see what it felt like to be a boss,” Harper said. “Everybody has that feeling sooner or later, whether they act on it or not.”

When Harper and George dissolved their partnership in 1983, Harper retired from industrial design and architecture. Looking back, Harper’s design legacy has proven he is one of the major figures in American modern design—one that continues to be refined and understood today. Many of his designs created for the American middle class during the postwar period while he worked in the Nelson office are not only back in production—his Marshmallow sofa (available from Herman Miller and Vitra), countless sculptural clocks for Howard Miller (now produced by Vitra), and colorful textiles for Schiffer Prints (available from Maharam), just to name a few—have become timeless, iconic pieces that are both reflective of the heyday of 1950s American industrial design, and at the same time their universal appeal makes them relevant in today’s contemporary spaces.

Harper’s retirement from professional design allowed him to turn to focus on his next creative passion: creating whimsical, eclectic and masterful paper sculptures, constructed almost entirely of cut, folded and glued paper. What started as a hobby in 1963, as a means of relieving stress from a demanding professional project—the design of the Chrysler pavilion—became a fulltime passion

that continued for over three decades. “You take a flat piece of paper and cut it into a shape,” he once explained. “Then you score it and you bend it and it becomes three-dimensional. That’s the secret of the whole thing.” His earliest sculpture, a graceful, mask-like headdress fashioned out of fragments of a bamboo window blind, was the first of more than 300 sculptures that he would produce until about 2000—when he filled up his house and barn, and ran out of space to display them. “I like to have them around,” said Harper, who never sold any of the pieces, only rarely trading them for artworks. “They constitute my environment and I don’t want to deprive myself of them.”



Courtesy of the Irving Harper Archive

“Irving would go home and work on ‘his toys’—as he called them,” said Longinotti. “When he finally retired they became his obsession.” Harper channeled his original talent for graphics, spatial reasoning and formal problem solving into a creative passion that opened a whole new chapter of his career—one focused on an artistic expression that drew inspiration from visits to Manhattan art galleries and the Metropolitan Museum of Art resulting in colorful expressions as varied as Egyptian cats and antelope heads to influences from Surrealism, de Stijl, and above all—Picasso—the latter led him to make sculptures drawn from the figures and animals in *Guernica*. Now, people can finally share in the love of paper sculpture from this unsung figure of modern design.